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SUBJECT: ONE-SIDED VICTORY?: ST. KITTS AND NEVIS ADOPTS
ELECTORAL REFORM

¶1. (U) Summary: In early December 2007 the St. Christopher (St. Kitts) and Nevis Parliament approved major changes to the country's election laws, the first changes since 1984. Reforms in the current law include the introduction of a national voter identification card and new regulations allowing for nationals living abroad to register and then return to the Federation to vote in elections. While the official Opposition Party (the Nevis-based Concerned Citizen's Movement) reports that the reforms are generally acceptable, the People's Action Movement complains bitterly that the process was one-sided and has resulted in a flawed law that facilitates potential irregularities and corruption. Now that the reforms have become law, the country will begin the equally contentious task of debating how to redistrict the boundaries of each constituency. End Summary.

SKN Electoral Reform Reaches Its Zenith

¶2. (U) After years of independent studies, commissions, and public debates, the St. Kitts and Nevis Parliament passed legislation meant to improve the country's election laws. Sparked by allegations of corruption following the ruling St. Kitts/Nevis Labour Party's (SKNLP) election victory in October 2004, the electoral reform process began with a report compiled by a Commonwealth Assessment Mission that visited the country in August 2005. Shortly afterwards, the government formed the Electoral Reform Secretariat and appointed Raphael Archibald, former Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, as chairman. The Secretariat's Advisory Committee presented its recommendations to the Parliamentary committee earlier this year.

¶3. (U) After the rather exhaustive bureaucratic exercise, the final electoral reform measures were debated in the St. Kitts and Nevis Parliament this November and December. While the eventual law boasts two major reforms--the implementation of a national voter ID card and rules for allowing overseas nationals to vote--the opposition People's Action Movement (represented by only one member of Parliament) withdrew from the debates once a proposal to require voter fingerprints was dropped from the legislation.

Some Opposition Says Reform Efforts Corrupted

¶4. (SBU) People Action's Movement's (PAM) leader Lindsay Grant complained to PolOff that the "majority of persons in

this country are unhappy with the legislation." According to Grant, the legislation is not acceptable because it does not require fingerprints and also because it did not require a "re-registration" of the Voter's List, which he claims has long been corrupted. Grant lamented that the voter identification card will still allow corrupt practices, whereas fingerprints would have offered an "almost fool-proof" solution. As noted by the Commonwealth Assessment Mission's 2005 report, Grant continued to allege that the Voter's List includes duplicate entries and deceased individuals, which could have been fixed by re-constituting the entire list. Grant noted that the law provides for no campaign finance regulations and therefore would allow foreign nationals and governments (including Cuba and Venezuela) to legally influence an election through campaign contributions.

¶15. (SBU) In contrast, the Official Leader of the Opposition Mark Brantley, and former Nevis Premier Vance Amory, both of the Concerned Citizen's Movement (CCM) expressed confidence that the electoral reform process has been transparent and democratic. They stated that while not every reform the CCM would have wanted included made it into the final legislation, the party is generally satisfied with the reforms, and confident that the law will ensure free and fair elections. They dismissed Grant's concerns as political maneuvering.

Remittances Come in Votes, Not Just Cash

¶16. (U) Among the most curious and controversial reforms are the sections of the law that allow nationals living abroad to vote in elections. Previously, the law only allowed

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"residents" and nationals "domiciled" in the Federation to vote in elections. The new legislation allows SKN nationals living abroad to register with Embassies and Consulates, and then to return to the Federation to vote. According to Chairman of the Electoral Advisory Committee Raphael Archibald, political parties will not be prohibited from paying for the transportation costs of SKN nationals living abroad to return for the elections. Since the St. Kitts/Nevis diaspora is estimated to possibly exceed the population of the country, the new regulation means that future elections could be swayed by the overseas population, and by the abilities of the political parties to mobilize that population.

¶17. (U) Now that the electoral reform legislation has passed, the Electoral Reform Secretariat is turning its attention to re-districting. The Boundaries Technical Committee is expected to offer its recommendations to the Secretariat for the new boundaries before the end of December 2007. The Secretariat's subsequent recommendations will then be sent to

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Parliament in mid-2008. As expected, the PAM has already raised serious concerns about the motives and methods of the re-districting efforts.

COMMENT

¶18. (SBU) The results of St. Kitts and Nevis's Electoral Reform exercise are a mixed bag. The formalized system of a voter ID card is certainly far superior to the informal system where poll workers relied on personally knowing and recognizing each voter; however, as the PAM notes, the new system will likely not be foolproof, and corrupt election practices in future SKN elections are not out of the question. More disconcerting, however, are the new laws allowing citizens living abroad to vote in elections. The end result of this part of the legislation, especially given the lack of financing regulations, could be expanded

manipulation of election results if the political parties or other interest groups begin funding campaign drives to "bus" these voters in for elections. End comment.

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